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Family

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Families are the center of human life and the building blocks of human civilization. What matters most in families is not their form, but how well they function - as healthy, moral places for children to grow and learn; as first lines of defense in times of crisis; as sources of life-long mutual support; and as caregivers and advocates for family members with disabilities and the elderly.

That's an ambitious list of essential duties, and not all families fulfill them all of the time. And even when families do, today's society and economy make the need for personal care by paid outsiders - of infants and children, frail elders, and family members with certain kinds of disabilities - almost inevitable. Mothers who used to stay home and care for children, the elderly, and family members with disabilities are now in the work force. The human services system is just beginning to absorb the immensity of this change in the way families work.

That's not all that's changed. In mid-twentieth century Washington, our high school dropout rate was about 50 percent - and no one complained much, because there were plenty of family wage jobs for people without high school diplomas. If poverty, alcoholism or other family problems caused kids to give up on academic learning, they still had vocational opportunities. Today, that's just not so. Today, lack of education is a virtual guarantee of frustration and failure, so the human services that keep kids in school have taken on a new importance.

Risk and protective factors for children: Parents teach by example

Research shows that children are at risk when their parents abuse drugs or alcohol, engage in violent or illegal acts, and when parents involve kids in these activities. Family management problems and family conflict also put children at risk.

| Family Risk Factors | Teenage Problem Outcomes | | | | |
|--|--------------------------|-------------|------------------|-----------------|----------|
| | Substance Abuse | Delinquency | School Pregnancy | School Drop-Out | Violence |
| Family history of the problem behavior | X | X | X | X | X |
| Family management problems | X | X | X | X | X |
| Family conflict | X | X | X | X | X |
| Favorable parental attitudes and involvement in the problem behavior | X | X | | | X |

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An "X" means that two or more rigorous studies followed specific children for many years and determined that these risk factors, early in life, were related to the identified problem behaviors later in life.

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Helping Parents Succeed • One of the keys to helping kids succeed in school is to help parents succeed at home. DSHS helps parents succeed in many ways, but probably none has touched more lives in the last five years than WorkFirst. Early studies of similar programs in other states found that when parents get jobs and leave the welfare rolls, students get better grades and have fewer discipline problems.

DSHS programs also help parents keep rebellious or troubled teens in school. Family Reconciliation Services provide counseling to teens and parents to help them resolve conflicts. DSHS-contracted shelters get runaways off the streets and into safe, positive, pro-education environments - and, if they need it, into specialized treatment for mental illness or chemical dependency.

Fifty years ago, if poverty, alcoholism or other family problems caused kids to give up on learning and drop out of school, they could still get family-wage jobs. Today, that's just not so.

Good parenting also requires sobriety. Chemical dependency is a disease that strikes one out of ten people, and many lack the income or health insurance benefits they need to get treatment. DSHS finances treatment provided by counties and private providers for approximately 23,000 low-income adults and over 5,000 adolescents per year. The highest priority for publicly-paid treatment is accorded to pregnant and parenting women. Parents with children in the home and those participating in WorkFirst come next. Still, there are often long waits for those who need and qualify for treatment. Because non-custodial parents are not a high priority for treatment, they are especially likely to wait - and while they are waiting, it's unlikely that they will pay child support or play a positive role in their children's lives.

Focusing on Fathers • DSHS is a national leader in collecting child support from non-custodial parents. In the last few years we have begun to create media campaigns that promote responsible fatherhood, and to cosponsor conferences to further explore how to restore the universal understanding that responsible, engaged, and supportive fathers are as important to children as are mothers.



Photo courtesy Family Policy Council

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Helping Parents of Children with Disabilities • Parenting children with disabilities often requires professional advice, expertise, and a range of other special supports. A child with a disability may require specialized child care, medical services, and early childhood education - all of which are financed by DSHS programs. Single parents who care for a child with a disability may also be unable to work, and so they are not subject to the five-year time limit for cash assistance.

Many disabilities last a lifetime. People who are developmentally disabled, have serious mental illnesses, or challenging physical conditions often need help throughout their lives in order to live to their fullest potential. Many people with disabilities want to live independently, and DSHS offers them long-term care services in their homes that allow them to do so. Year by year, fewer people with developmental disabilities and mental illness are in institutions, and more are living successfully in the community. People with disabilities also receive vocational rehabilitation services to help them prepare for and find jobs.

Helping Immigrant Families Succeed • Immigrant and refugee families also have special challenges in learning to speak a new language and navigate a new culture - and to find work, friends, and social support systems in their communities. DSHS contracts with community organizations that help immigrants and refugees make this enormous and difficult transition, and WorkFirst helps them get jobs and enter the economic mainstream.

Protecting Society's Most Important Institution • Healthy families are our most important social asset. They provide the safety net that works best when times get tough, and when illness or disability strikes. But today's families face new fears and pressures, and bigger demands on parents' time. In our mobile society, many parents lack the back-up systems that extended families used to provide. The result is that although families are no less vital, many are more fragile and precariously balanced than they have ever been. In these circumstances, the value of family needs more than homage; it needs thoughtful, thorough support from employers, communities, the media, and government as well as the human services system.



Immigrant and refugee families face special challenges: learning to speak a new language and navigate a new culture; finding work; making friends, and helping their children succeed.